

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - November 2016

### Experiences as a Vicar's Wife from Germany.



There was not a spare seat in the room for the Wargrave Local History Society's November meeting, when Barbara Ratings gave an outstanding presentation, full of interest, laughter and thought-provoking observation, of her Experiences as a Vicar's Wife from Germany.

Barbara began by defining 'a vicar's wife'. The Protestant Reformation was inspired by Martin Luther in 1517. He was protesting against the Roman Catholic manner of preaching and treatment of the faithful. Luther was a monk who married Katharina von Bora who was a nun. They moved into the local vicarage and became the Father and Mother of the parish - and so Katharina was the first "vicar's wife".

Barbara's childhood was spent in Besigheim, near Stuttgart, where her father had moved the family in the 1940s. However, on four occasions, the house was requisitioned for use by American army officers. Barbara's mother was able to hide the family silver beneath the garden compost heap, and she, with her three daughters, were able to live at the local vicarage. The vicar's wife not only took them in, but also cared for refugees fleeing from the Russian advance westwards.

Barbara wondered if she would perhaps become a vicar's wife like that, or more like Charlotte Lucas who faithfully supported her ridiculous and insensible husband Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*! Maybe she would be seen one day serving cucumber sandwiches on a well-groomed vicarage lawn? Barbara thought Caroline Chartres, wife of Bishop of London, summed up well the position of the present day vicar's wife - one who whilst expecting to be employed in their own right (and so establishing their own identity) was also still expected to pull her weight in the parish.

Barbara then went on to explain how she and John had met. As a sixth form student she preferred French to English, but her school had contacts where students could work in England for several months in the summer. Her friends all had placements in London, but Barbara went to the village of Cuddesdon - near, but not in, Oxford. There were few buses daily into Oxford, and her duties with the Runcie family included helping with the children, including 3 year old James (now well-known as the author of the Grantchester ITV drama series). Robert Runcie was then the Principal of Cuddesdon Theological College - where John Ratings was a trainee priest.

Barbara later learnt that John had noticed her before she saw him - he "liked the blonde girl in the green coat" - fellow students apparently told him "Get on with your prayers Ratings!!" After 2 weeks without meeting any students, Mrs Runcie invited her to the Saturday afternoon tea in the College - the time when women were allowed in. Mrs Runcie told Barbara not "to worry if the students pull your leg" - the English phrase (and several others) did not have a direct equivalent in German!!!

John had a car - and invited Barbara out to go into Oxford, as she wanted to go and buy presents for the children. They would also be seen walking in the orchard or nearby country lanes, so John was asked by Robert Runcie what his 'intentions' were towards Barbara - and Mrs Runcie made it known she did not want to lose her au pair! John wished to please Barbara, inviting her out for a Chinese meal, or to the opera - although they did not see the second half, as John had to be back in College by 10 pm.

Barbara then returned home to complete her A levels and to go on to study at Bremen university. Over time the "English theology student" became her "English boyfriend", and then "serious English boyfriend". John, meanwhile, had embarked on his first curacy, at a 'training parish' near Manchester. This was a large social housing estate of some 28,000 people, where the only 'professional' people were the clergy and a couple of nuns. As a result, Barbara had a very different courtship in comparison to her friends - meeting no more than twice each year, (with John always in "dull and boring suits" and dog collar) and otherwise writing letters regularly - the cost of international telephone calls at £5 per minute being prohibitive. It also meant that Barbara did not experience his actual ordination, and the importance that had for John. His plan at that time was to work in the Manchester diocese. She was looking forwards to getting married, which they did in 1968, in Germany. The process there involved seeing the Registrar before they could get married, for which John was provided with an interpreter to help with the questions, (not the same as those in a C of E marriage service).

Barbara then returned to England as a curate's wife. John did not want to run his own parish straight away, but wanted a curacy in a parish of different type, to widen his experience. Robert Runcie had by then become Bishop at St Albans - and suggested Easthampstead - the Bishop thinking it important that Barbara live near an airport!!

Easthampstead was liturgically like Roman Catholics, without being RC. They used vestments and candles, and had processions, and regular communion services - something Barbara was not used to. She preferred Evensong for many months, but later would attend the morning services. The reason behind the change was simple - the television was showing the Forsyte Saga in the evenings! There were also changes for John, to, as Barbara introduced him to the duvet. Like a true convert, he then would talk passionately about them.

John was then invited to go to Geneva to study at the World Council of Churches' College for Ecumenical Studies. But, what would Barbara do? The Lutheran World Federation were able to fund her to attend as well, and so their six months in Geneva was a chance to get to know each other better, and without any 'professional responsibilities' they had time to meet many interesting people and discuss a wide range of issues.

It was following that, in 1971, that John became the vicar of Wargrave. They had to become acquainted with different customs - from parties where guests were welcomed by a butler, or where the ladies were expected to 'withdraw' after dinner, or some parishioners who would always arrive at, or leave, the vicarage by the back door. John was keen to keep an 'open house', although one well known lady from the village did take that literally, and walked in to find Barbara sitting on John's lap!! On the other hand, when their young daughters saw couples attending Vicar's Surgery before they got married they would giggle and comment 'they are kissing'. When it came to the wedding services, Barbara would on occasion join with the choir, and found that they would try to anticipate which of the regular sermons John was going to deliver!

Life at the vicarage involved other 'duties' - from washing some of the church linen ("church nighties and hankies") to dealing with tramps who called, or to running the Young Wives group, being involved with the Welcome Committee, or with the various Sunday School groups.

In 1971, she experienced her first Remembrance Service - with brass bands, and various groups marching to the church service and then - the unbelievably moving Act of Remembrance on Mill Green. This was something that did not happen in a formal way in her home town, and she said that nowhere is Remembrance held on such a lovely spot as the Mill Green. In 2005, she was thrilled to be invited by the

British Legion to give the speech at a commemorative lunch to honour the 60th anniversary of VE and VJ day, when she could portray the present day Germany, in which she grew up, a free, democratic and welcoming country.

Barbara then went on to recount her time teaching locally, first in Ascot, and then Bracknell, and for many years in the brilliant Modern Languages department at The Piggott School. In due course this became accepted as a centre of excellence, and a Language College. The European Union funded the Comenius Project, linking schools in Britain, Denmark, Germany and Latvia, for which Barbara was international coordinator. Her work in promoting German-British relations came to the attention of the German Government, and in 2002 she was awarded the Bundesverdienstkreuz am Bande (John would refer to it as her "Iron Cross").

Barbara concluded by saying that she had 37 years as the vicar's wife, in a community which she and John loved - and she still does.

In a situation unprecedented in the Society's 35 year history, Barbara kindly gave a repeat of her presentation later in the month, for the many people unable to join the audience on the first occasion.

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday December 13th, when the Society will have its Christmas Party, whilst on Tuesday, January 10th, Dan Wood - who grew up in Wargrave, and has worked on the river - will recount some of his wide range of experiences of times on the river, from the 'every day' to the 'pomp, ceremony and tradition', whilst on Tuesday, February 14th, Graham Jones will tell us about the life of The Lambourn Valley Railway and some of the people associated with it.